

Wall Street Journal, October 10, 2006

Meet Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury. As these lines are being written, Mr. Choudhury, a gadfly Bangladeshi journalist, is running for his life. Assuming he survives till Thursday, he will face charges of blasphemy, sedition, treason and espionage in a Dhaka courtroom. His crime is to have tried to attend a writers' conference in Tel Aviv on how the media can foster world peace. If convicted, he could face the death penalty.

Welcome to Bangladesh, a country the State Department's Richard Boucher recently portrayed in congressional testimony as "a traditionally moderate and tolerant country" that shares America's "commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law." That's an interesting way to describe a country that is regularly ranked as the world's most corrupt by Transparency International and whose governing coalition, in addition to the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, includes two fundamentalist Islamic parties that advocate the imposition of Shariah law. There are an estimated 64,000 madrassas (religious schools) in Bangladesh. The Ministry of Industries is in the hands of Motiur Rahman Nizami, a radical Islamist with a reputation of a violent past. In March the Peace Corps was forced to leave the country for fear of terrorist attacks. Seven other journalists have also been brought up on sedition charges by Ms. Zia's government, most of them for attempting to document Bangladesh's repression of religious minorities.

But few stories better illustrate the Islamist tinderbox that Bangladesh has become than Mr. Choudhury's. "When I began my newspaper [the Weekly Blitz] in 2003 I decided to make an end to the well-orchestrated propaganda campaign against Jews and Christians and especially against Israel," he says in the first of several telephone interviews in recent days. "In Bangladesh and especially during Friday prayers, the clerics propagate jihad and encourage the killing of Jews and Christians. When I was a child my father told me not to believe those words but to look at the world's realities."

With that in mind, Mr. Choudhury, then 38, began publishing articles sympathetic to Israel in the Weekly Blitz while reaching out to Jewish and Israeli writers he encountered on the Web. That led to the invitation by the Hebrew Writers' Association, and to Mr. Choudhury's only crime: By attempting to travel to Israel in November 2003, he violated the Passport Act, which forbids citizens from visiting countries (such as Israel and Taiwan) with which Bangladesh does not maintain diplomatic relations. Violations of the Passport Act are usually punishable by a fine of \$8.

But that wasn't the sentence meted to Mr. Choudhury. Following his arrest he was taken into police custody and, as he tells it, blindfolded, beaten and interrogated almost incessantly for 10 days in an attempt to extract a confession that he was spying for Israel. He refused to offer one. He spent the next 16 months in solitary confinement in a Dhaka jail, where he was denied medical treatment for his glaucoma.

By then, Mr. Choudhury's case had come to the attention of Congressman Mark Kirk (R., Ill.), who intervened with Bangladesh's ambassador to the U.S. to secure Mr. Choudhury's release on bail, though the charges were never formally dropped. Help also came from Richard Benkin, a Chicago-area activist who has taken up Mr. Choudhury's cause, and the American Jewish Committee, which invited Mr. Choudhury to the U.S. in May to receive its Moral Courage Award. But Mr. Choudhury says he decided to forgo the trip after a government minister warned him, "If you go, it will not be good for you."

In July, the offices of the Weekly Blitz were bombed by Islamic militants. In September, a judge with Islamist ties ordered the case continued, despite the government's reluctance to prosecute, on the grounds that Mr. Choudhury had hurt the sentiments of Muslims by praising Christians and Jews and spoiling the image of Bangladesh world-wide. Last week, the police detail that had been posted to the Blitz's offices since the July bombing mysteriously vanished. The next day the offices were ransacked and Mr. Choudhury was badly beaten by a mob of 40 or so people. Over the weekend he lodged a formal complaint with the police, who responded by issuing an arrest warrant for him. Now he's on the run, fearing torture or worse if he's taken into custody.

Much of Mr. Choudhury's current predicament can be traced to Ms. Zia's reluctance to cross her Islamist coalition partners, who are keen on the case of the "Zionist spy" and would like nothing more than to see him hang. It doesn't help that a powerless caretaker government will take charge later this month in preparation for next January's elections. The U.S. Embassy in Dhaka has kept track of Mr. Choudhury and plans to send an observer to his trial. But mainly America's diplomats seem to have treated him as a nuisance. "Their thinking," says a source familiar with the case, "is that this is the story of one man, and why should the U.S. base its entire relationship with Bangladesh on this one man?"

Here's an answer: Bangladesh does not mean much strategically to the U.S., except for the fact that it is home to some 120 million Muslims, many of them desperately poor and increasingly under the sway of violent religious notions imported from Saudi Arabia. The Bush

administration, which every year spends some \$64 million on Bangladesh, has made a priority of identifying moderate Muslims and giving them the space and cover they need to spread their ideas. Mr. Choudhury has identified himself, at huge personal risk, as one such Muslim. Now that he is on the run, somewhere in the darkness of Dhaka, will someone in the administration pick up the phone and explain to the Bangladeshis just what America expects of its "moderate and tolerant" friends?